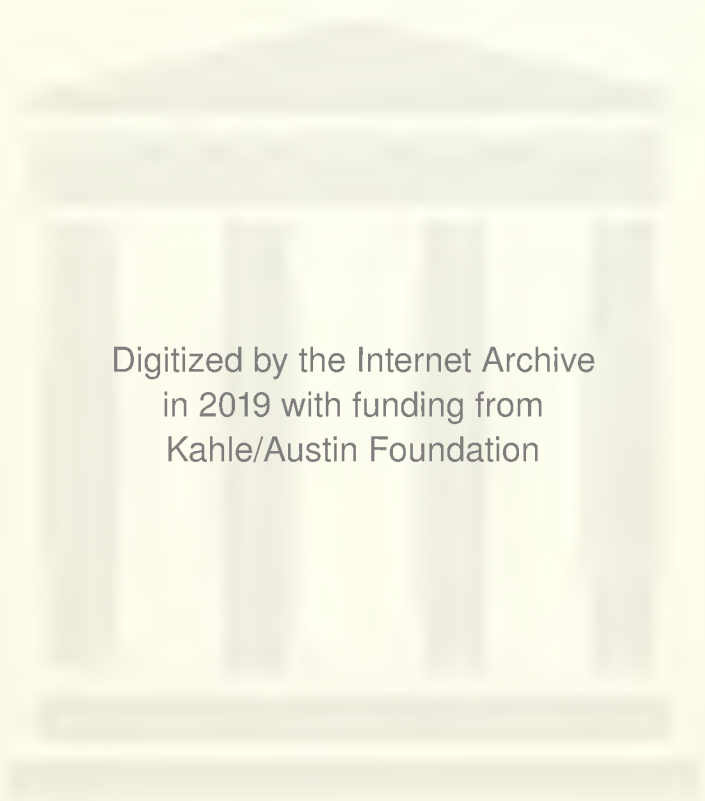


PR
.6005
.04Z783

NUNC COGNOSCO EX PARTE



TRENT UNIVERSITY
LIBRARY



Digitized by the Internet Archive
in 2019 with funding from
Kahle/Austin Foundation

CONRAD
AND
THE REPORTERS

OTHER BOOKS
BY THE SAME AUTHOR

Fiction

PARNASSUS ON WHEELS
THE HAUNTED BOOKSHOP
KATHLEEN
TALES FROM A ROLLTOP DESK
WHERE THE BLUE BEGINS

Essays

SHANDYGAFF
MINCE PIE
PIPEFULS
PLUM PUDDING
TRAVELS IN PHILADELPHIA
THE POWDER OF SYMPATHY
INWARD HO!

Poetry

SONGS FOR A LITTLE HOUSE
THE ROCKING HORSE
HIDE AND SEEK
CHIMNEYSMOKE
TRANSLATIONS FROM THE CHINESE
PARSONS' PLEASURE



*Joseph Conrad and Captain David Bone
on the bridge of R. M. S. "Tuscania"*

CONRAD
AND
THE REPORTERS
BY
CHRISTOPHER MORLEY



"Who, at twelve years of age, thought,
that all the best things were far away."

—The Journal of William Hall

GARDEN CITY NEW YORK
DOUBLEDAY, PAGE & COMPANY
1923

PP 6005 O1Z783

COPYRIGHT, 1923, BY
DOUBLEDAY, PAGE & COMPANY
ALL RIGHTS RESERVED, INCLUDING THAT OF TRANSLATION
INTO FOREIGN LANGUAGES, INCLUDING THE SCANDINAVIAN

COPYRIGHT, 1923, BY NEW YORK EVENING POST, INCORPORATED

PRINTED IN THE UNITED STATES
AT
THE COUNTRY LIFE PRESS, GARDEN CITY, N. Y.

Reprinted from the New York Evening Post, May, November, 1923

EIGHT HUNDRED AND FIFTEEN COPIES
OF THIS BOOK HAVE BEEN PRINTED, FROM
TYPE WHICH HAS BEEN DISTRIBUTED.

PRESENTED TO
BOOKSELLER FRIENDS ONLY,
WITH BEST WISHES
FOR A HAPPY AND PROSPEROUS

1924

FROM THE AUTHOR AND THE PUBLISHERS

86833

CONRAD AND THE REPORTERS

I

THE gist of the adventure, I can see now, is in the relation between Conrad and the reporters. It is pleasant to contemplate the paradox: a quite genuine meeting of spirit between the long-thoughtful Ulysses who crushes his grapes of meditation secretly, leisurely, and these inquisitives who (whether they like it or not) are compelled to catch their thoughts young. It would be hard to say, let me add, which is the more painful task—Mr. Conrad's, or the Reporter's.

For if you allow a thought to grow and mature in your mind, it gradually clothes itself and walks out decently raimented. If you have to chase it in its infancy, the task is as perplexing as catching, scrubbing, and decking a lively child for a party.

Among the reporters who went down the bay to meet Joseph Conrad aboard the *Tuscania* there were some of those gayly intrepid souls to whom one assignment is much the same as another, and who would question a Pope, an ectoplast, a Coué, or an Einstein with the same cheery irrelevance. There were others, knowing something of Mr. Conrad's ways of thinking and feeling, who were anxious. They were troubled, first on Mr. Conrad's behalf, knowing with

what horror he would encounter the insensate rush of questioners. They were troubled also on behalf of their own country, hating that a visitor so truly loved and honored should have his first impression marred and irritated by this fantastic absurdity. It is odd that though New York's one most charmingly youthful passion is to know what her callers think of her seaward loveliness, she makes it—by bombarding them with trivialities as they come up the harbor—impossible for them to think at all.

Now how far, one wonders, is trespass upon the privacy of others permissible? Just so far, I think, as the sum of human virtue is likely to be increased thereby. And because most of the literary commentators on Mr. Conrad have

tended to give too grim a portrait, I feel that he would forgive a sympathetic attempt to show him as he appeared in what must have been a difficult experience.

I had always imagined a much burlier man: a man more dour, austere, and remote. The first and most important thing to convey is that, to this little group of attentive students, the instant feeling toward Mr. Conrad was not quite one of awe, but the most honest, tender affection. A spare, almost fragile figure, garbed with clerical sobriety in a black overcoat, white muffler, and a round bowler hat, his left arm bandaged (he suffers painfully from gout), there was something beautifully gentle and kindly in his manner. As one of the reporters said afterward, rack-

ing his wits to express the occasion, "he looked like a perplexed physician." Perplexed was the right word; it might almost have been put down as timid, for Mr. Conrad was evidently in horror of the ordeal of being catechized by a number of strangers. And in that backward-slanted head, with its strong angle of jaw and beard, the deeply carved face, the dark brown heavy-lidded eyes, there was also a faint spark of grimness. One knew that he had resolved to do everything possible to meet these strange demands; and yet that there was a "shadow-line" beyond which trespass was inadvisable.

But it was the gentle, friendly simplicity that the reporters felt most strongly. The photographers—who are barbarians, relent-

less and persistent—swarmed upon him first, uttering sharp cries of instruction. “Take your hat off, Mr. Conrad!” — “Stand behind that rail!” The reporters, more delicate-minded souls, were indignant; Mr. Conrad turned despairing eyes towards them as he tried, patiently, to follow instructions. “Take your hat off, Mr. Conrad!” one ruffian kept shouting. But of the conduct of the photographers one does not like to speak.

Captain David Bone, anxious to spare his guest, spirited him away to the master’s cabin, and here the reporters were able to sit down quietly with him. And here it was plain that our fears—both for him and for ourselves—had been exaggerated. How charming he was! Sitting on the sofa, with shy but

most humane cordiality he told us what a happiness it had been to be at sea once more. He spoke of the ships that had been dear to him long ago, gravely mentioning their lovely names—the *Otago* (his first command)—the *Skimmer of the Seas* (a Lowestoft coaster)—the *Tremolino*, the *Duke of Sutherland*, the *Loch Elive*, the *Adowia* (a steamship) in which he wrote Chapter Ten of *Almayer's Folly* while he was expecting her to sail for America. But she never did. "This is my farthest West," he said. "Of course, I've often been out to Australia, running the easting down, but this is my first time across the Western Ocean." He had been delighted by his first view of the Clyde, which he had never seen before, "being a London

skipper.” Captain Bone had read him John Burroughs’ essay on the Clyde. We explained to him that this is the Glasgow shipmaster’s favorite piece of literature, and that every voyage he looks about for a kinsprit passenger to whom he may introduce it. Conrad chuckled. Yes, Captain Bone had read him other favorites, too. *The Old Soak*, for instance, which had amused him greatly. He couldn’t understand why English publishers hadn’t brought it out. “It deals with a universal theme!”

From ships and the sea (“You must remember, my sea life is very long ago,” he said. “It all merges, now, into one solid impression. I have had three different lives.”) we got onto American literature. He spoke of Poe—whom he read

in French, as a boy; and Emerson, and Walt Whitman. But, asked further about Whitman (whose influence in France, he said, had been enormous) he eluded the query. He said, "My mind is not critical. I have not the general culture to be a literary critic. You must remember that the conditions of sea life do not permit it." He spoke with great affection of Henry James. It was James who first mentioned John Burroughs to him. Conrad chuckled at the thought of Burroughs. "The man who chased a nightingale," he said.

How lovely he was! The frankness of his smile was underlaid by an uneasy terror, which grew less, however, as he realized that these young men honestly meant to be

friendly. Interviewing is a dangerously ticklish art. Several of the little group were terrified for fear someone would ask some fool question which would disturb the happy rapprochement, so unexpectedly attained. There was one perilous person who was pining to say "What are your methods of work?" We could see the question teetering on the edge of his lips. Every time he opened his mouth the whole equilibrium was in danger. What a gross infliction, also, is the whole business! To hold a man up for his money is a peccadillo compared to it. To hold him up and demand those most precious guarded possessions—his memories, his opinions, his sentiments—this is truculence indeed.

II

HAPPINESS, it has often been suggested, consists in finding the right words. How is one to find those that will express the feeling of being on the *Tuscania's* bridge, that May Day morning, with Joseph Conrad? I suppose my tone of voice now lays me open to the charge of idolatry (there are worse charges, incidentally. And the chief argument against idolatry is not that it is unbecoming to the worshipper, but that it may be embarrassing or repugnant to the idol). The feeling of the reporters, as they stood decently apart while Mr. Conrad got a tran-

quail view of New York rising from the hyaline dimness of the spring sky, was not the mere admiration of an individual, however brave, sensitive, or potent. It was a sense of doing honor, through this man, to a certain phase of the human spirit: a sense of homage to one who *had* found the right words; who had, through long and patient years, tried to utter the unsayable tremors of the mind. At a time when we are repeatedly and wearisomely assured that the Cyrus Curtis kind of thing (admirable enough in its own innocent way) is the ultimate benison of human success, there was something purging in contemplating achievement of a different sort.

The harbor, from the high passage of *Tuscania's* bridge, lay as

smoothly shining as a ballroom floor; and, oddly enough, as though to pay respect to their spokesman, an unusual number of sailing vessels were moving. Muirhead Bone, with a face of happy excitement, was busy at a drawing board where he had already sketched and colored the massive forecastle of the ship and the great cairn of brown tin trunks which are the familiar sign of British emigrants. Now, on the horizon of his drawing M. B. was swiftly filling in the profile of the city. There was a delicious amusement in noting that most of the interviewers were quite unaware of the identity of Mr. Muirhead Bone. The photographers presently made another ugly rush, and cornered Conrad in the wing of the bridge; somehow

or other Muirhead Bone found himself included in this picture; but, as he humorously remarked when these zealots afterward asked him to account for himself, "they were frightfully disgusted when they found I wasn't another author." Meanwhile the reporters, with ecstatic pleasure, were comparing notes on the deck below. Those who had taken shorthand memoranda (which, as shorthand memoranda usually are, were badly garbled) were verifying the facts from those who had merely listened. They had done so much better than they had expected. "Did you hear him say that writing is a fearful grind?" they cheerfully ejaculated. "That's the lead, all right." "What did he say exactly when he was asked which is his

favorite book?" "He said 'It depends on the day.'" And so it went down in at least one avid notebook, and eventually appeared (in the New York *Times*, to my delight) that Mr. Conrad's best-loved work is *It Depends on the Day*. "There's hardly a man here," one of the group had ejaculated, "who hasn't read your books!" Alas, one fears that was not quite accurate. For, in spite of the affectionate clearness with which the master had spoken of some of the vessels of his past, another paper had him down as having commanded a schooner, *The Skimmer of the Seas*, for twelve years. High spirited skimmers of the seas of interview are the ship-news reporters. They dip their wings in facts and skim away.

Meanwhile, as David Bone explained to Conrad, the *Tuscania* was "sailing up Broadway." Her great stem was pointed straight at that terrific chine that opens between the Equitable and the Singer (names that seemed to strike Mr. Conrad with some allegorical value), that deeply notched axe-cut into the stone fabric of Manhattan that stands for the mariner as a line of direction for the deep-water channel. The grizzled old quartermaster (we shall never forget having seen him pipe the haggis in at one or two Scottish parties aboard the old *Columbia*) stood gravely at the wheel, somewhat troubled (I couldn't help thinking) at the unusual incursion of outsiders into his holy precinct. Conrad, at

one of the wheelhouse windows, watched the rising bristle of New York. I do not think much escaped him. It was evident that, long ago, he had formed a clear idea of the geography of our region. Cooper, it seems, had put the East River into his mind; and (if I caught him rightly) he had gathered some impression of the Jersey side from Max Adeler. Brooklyn, the Brooklyn Bridge, Jersey City, the Battery, all these he seemed to greet and relish in his mind as things mentally familiar for a lifetime. The little plumes of steam that float like feathers from the tips of the high buildings, softly dissipating into that exquisite cool blue air, pleased him greatly. Muirhead Bone, with a face of growing ecstasy, was

pondering the criss-cross skeleton of the Standard Oil building that is going up near Bowling Green.

Of course what the infatuated ship-news reporter is always dumbly hoping for is that the Great Visitor—whoever it may be—will some day say something about this Skyline of ours that will effectually and eventually label it. The ship-news reporter has that same obscure hankering for the right word that troubles the greatest of his fellows. But at any rate Mr. Conrad was wise enough not to attempt it. One had a feeling that, by the time the *Tuscania* passed the Battery he had seen as much as he could hold together in one clutch of the mind. He was tired, and Captain Bone had a chair put for him in the sunny

corner of the bridge. Here, presently, more sedative topics were discussed. He was greatly interested in watching the pilot; and remarked that in the old days pilots did not smoke on duty. This, naturally, led toward Captain Bone's famous invention, the Dog's Wool tobacco; and Mr. Conrad admitted one of the problems that was troubling him. "I can only smoke one thing," he said, and mentioned a well-known brand of French cigarette. "I have only three left," he said. "Three packets?" we inquired in alarm, "or three single cigarettes?" "Three poor little cigarettes," he said (with that note of tremulous tenderness that seems characteristic; and with a sort of beseeching appeal in his brown eyes). He

pulled out a small cigarette case and showed them. Only three. "Do you suppose," he said, "*Do* you suppose there is somewhere we can get some?"

So one of the first envoys across the gangplank, after *Tuscania* docked, carried the message to Conrad's waiting host that the first and most urgent thing to do was to stop the car on the way uptown and lay in a bale of *Marylands*.

III

THE cheerful reporters had trooped below for some breakfast and Mr. Conrad was left sitting peacefully in a chair in the sheltered ingle at one wing of the bridge. There was something more than mere fatigue in his retirement into himself, I thought. It was an evidence of that temperament that prefers to digest as it goes along; that knows instinctively when the mind has received all it requires and needs to pause and ponder. The seamanly art of stowage has also its services in the traffic of thought. As the *Tuscania* lay in midstream, waiting

for the *Aquitania* to back out before she herself could reach her berth, Conrad sat quietly at the far end of the bridge. Perhaps those who had expected him to gaze endlessly at the panorama of Manhattan were surprised. It seemed to me an evidence of wisdom. At the moment he was more interested in a small schooner with a deckload of lumber that was passing upstream. Her he had noticed promptly, just as he had noticed the little Canadian sailing vessel that swung under *Tuscania's* bows at Quarantine. When some one needlessly called his attention to her he had said: "Yes, I've been watching her all morning." Great things, sometimes, can be taken in at a glance; it is only the small things that need

patient scrutiny. According to the simple code of the ship-news reporter, perhaps he should never have ceased gazing at the serrated silhouette of towers. Perhaps also one sentimentalizes or fabricates motives that are only imaginary. But it seemed to me that there was a temperamental wisdom in this. Having had one good look at the view, he retired to the other side of the deck and averted his eyes. I feel no danger in sentimentalizing the one who has always seemed to me the most truly and nobly sentimental of modern writers. A sentimental writer, to my way of thinking, is one who is aware that the mind is capable of suffering and that the greatest of these sufferings are rarely uttered.

The right man, incidentally,

from whom to get the "story" of Mr. Conrad's voyage to America would have been Mr. Muirhead Bone. Fortunately for the latter, these high-spirited young men did not suspect that. They did not know that Bone and Conrad had been cabin-mates, and, more than that, had found themselves kin-spirits. They did not know that Mr. Conrad, in the exhilaration of finding himself again at sea and in such congenial company, had sat up until 2 o'clock or so every morning, in a red dressing gown, talking happily of art, seamanship, literature, and everything between. The drawings and dry-points that Bone made of Conrad during these sessions are the permanent record of this happy human incident. "It's the first time you've ever had

a picture made of you at sea," said Bone; and Conrad, somewhat surprised at the thought, admitted it. The one this reporter admired perhaps most of all shows Conrad and David Bone deep in sea reminiscence—Conrad deeply hunched in a large armchair in the captain's cabin, his head drawn backward and upward, as is his habit, and the master of the *Tuscania* in rearward profile animatedly discussing some nautical nicety. It is no part of the reporter's duty to tread upon private matters; but if one were to admit honestly the most affecting incident of the whole adventure, it was when Conrad said good-by to his cabin-mate. "My dear fellow," he said; "my dear fellow . . . You must let me. . . ." He threw his arms

around the other man and kissed him on both cheeks. And this, we thought to ourself, is the man they have told us is so grim, so stern, so immovable.

Of course, in every human contact the best and most inward vibrations are intransmissible. One may well have wished he could have sat in stateroom A1 of the *Tuscania* during those midnight gossips when Muirhead Bone would remark, "Now, Ulysses, tell me about . . ." and Conrad, with that engaging smile: "Why, how charming that you should call me Ulysses! They used to call me that when I was a boy at Marseilles." For if such private nuances of human affection seem to you mere chatter, then little do you care for the tragic loveliness of

human hearts. And not even Conrad, however reticent he may be, can altogether hide his heart. With that tender cruelty of which he is so thrilling a master he has opened too many hearts on paper—the hearts of his creations.

For one comes to Conrad with unspeakable relief—with the feeling that here, at last, is a novelist who understands as poets do: who knows that man is the heroic victim of circumstances. He knows that the men commonly accounted “successful” have, for the most part, triumphed over merely petty and insignificant matters, and that to attain even that risible magistracy they have had to sacrifice much of what (to the eye of sentiment) was the true quality and honor of living. To honor Con-

rad is to honor the spirit of tragedy; to pity human folly and to share human irony; to know, further, that the most perfect troubles of the human heart are not merely pitiable, but sometimes occasion for envy. Conrad's books are one of the happy accidents that the English language deserved and the faithful art of seamanship had earned. And yet, though deserved and merited, they remain in the category of superb casualty, because they might so easily never have happened. They enter the high ranks of our most vital tradition with a doubled and beautiful strangeness. Here is a man, born to another tongue, who speaks to us in our own speech and yet also in a language far stranger and nearer than that of his nativity.

As Orlando said to Rosalind, his "accent is something finer than he could purchase in so removed a dwelling." For he speaks, between the lines of his noble prose, a language at once unbelievably more foreign and more familiarly intimate than any words actually written—the language of the human spirit, recognized by all and wholly understood by none.

And so to those who have something burningly foreign in their hearts Conrad will always be a message from inmost in. Those who enjoy their art in little precise stereotypes can never have much joy in him. They are still in the primitive stage of that adorable avuncular kinsman of Captain Bone who wrote a journal. His title for it was *The Journal of*

William Hall, Who, at Twelve Years of Age, Thought That All the Best Things Were Far Away. They are no farther away than one's own mind, if one has the courage to explore it. And those who have felt in their own imperilled bosoms the form and pressure of great follies, passions, aspirations, and sorceries, will find in Conrad the most heavenly relief and understanding. Here, when we so bitterly needed him, was the novelist we sought. He plunges the mind in cooling magnitudes. The critics used to call him "detached," whatever that may mean. But he knows that every day, every hour, every movement of life, is set in a translucent eddy of wonder and private agitation. He knows that men weary of telling lies.

IV

THIS charming remark of William Hall about his own boyhood caught Conrad's fancy. "It would make a good motto," he said. By this he meant particularly, I imagine, a motto for the title-page of a book. This interested me specially, for Conrad's own choice of title-page quotations, serving as an esoteric clue to the mood and tenor of the volume, has always been peculiarly adept. It always disappointed me, for instance, that for a number of years some of the American editions appeared without these mottoes; not by the design of the author, but merely by

lack of prudent coördination between the English and American publishers. Indeed the motto on the title-page of a book, carefully chosen by the author and hoisted there like a little string of signal buntings, is by no means the least significant emblem of his labor. The quotation at the masthead of *The Nigger of the "Narcissus"* is from Pepys: "My Lord in his discourse discovered a great deal of love to this ship." Mr. Conrad told me how he fell upon this excerpt. "I was calling on Henry James," he said, "and while waiting for him to come down I saw on his shelves a new and very beautiful set of Pepys. I took out one of the volumes and was glancing at it when my eye fell upon that passage. I had just fixed it in my

mind when I heard James coming. Quickly I shoved the book back on the shelf; I didn't want to be found looking at his treasures, it might have seemed discourteous. He was a very lovely but also a rather formidable person. But I had got my motto."

The *Reliance* came down the river very close to us, outward bound for Hamburg; and Conrad was once more the mariner, attentive to all her points. He was much entertained by the Panama flag which she was flying, and seemed to find a romantic amusement in the explanation for it. "A handsome ship, a handsome ship," he said several times, watching her keenly. She flowed past us, with that beautiful progress and fusion of lines and curves that takes place

under the eye of the observer as a ship swims by, particularly when she is seen from aloft. And then there came the deep, thrilling voice of the *Aquitania*, paying her respect to New York as she backed from her pier. From the *Tuscania's* bridge, only a few cables away, we could see her slip gently out into the stream, hang there a moment, and then begin the slow turning. Muirhead Bone, sketching busily, was dashing down the lines of her noble person. At first, when these great beauties manœuvre in midstream, there seems hardly a perceptible motion. Then, suddenly, amazingly, life comes into her: magical coefficients transact: she wheels glidingly on her axis, and with a gathering of power not less real than

that of any living creature falls into her stride. A maddening happiness for the artist, one suspected, watching those quick pencil strokes furiously catching her dissolving and re-forming profile, each line and curve and sheer melting instantaneously into another as she swung. The perfect slant and harmony of masts and funnels, the secure loveliness of water-line (the colored underbody rising gently into view both aft and forward, with a cunningly calculated impression of greater buoyancy), the exquisite bend and overhang of the stern, these are familiar pleasures to the harbor-loving New Yorker; and yet never adequately honored. This, one supposes, was almost the only nautical sight that Mr. Conrad had never seen before.

He studied it with professional attention. His only comment, so far as I remember, was to admire the yachtlike precision of her "trim." It is many years since Mr. Conrad "swallowed the anchor"; but his passion and enthusiasm for every workmanlike detail of the seaman's art are evidently no less keen than they ever were.

V

WE ARE a little aghast at the comments made by some of our fellow-reporters on our stumbling attempt to record the arrival of Conrad. It proves to us, as we have always maintained, that journalism is (in general) not a subdivision of literature, but something utterly and totally different, pointed a different way. For the general run of cheerful contradictions that we have received from professional colleagues is this: that to the reporter all individuals are much on a par; that he must grab off a few bright and startling de-

tails as rapidly as possible; that he must quote verbatim the troubled random utterances of the victim; and that it makes no difference who on earth he or she may be, provided there emerges some quaint, surprising, or pathetic outline of human interest.

We honestly think, however, that the reporters do themselves injustice. They do not, in their inward hearts, hold by this casuistry. They have arduously trained themselves to think they do. This is the antique jolly fetich of the City Desk, due to the harassed anxieties of the amiable heroic men who endeavor madly to keep abreast of uncatchable Time. As for the matter of verbatim quotation of a man talking perhaps in embarrassment and

haphazard, we recall a great couplet of William Blake:

A truth that's told with bad intent
Beats all the lies you can invent.

And by "bad" intent we do not mean malicious intent. We mean merely trivial intent. A fact is not a fact at all until it is seen in its just alleyway of perspective and sympathy. Tilt it ever so little on edge and what looked like a square appears now as a cube. If the sharpshooting method of reporting is so nobly representative, why is it that whenever (by the oddity of circumstance) a newspaper man himself chances to be interviewed he exhibits such uncontrollable agitation?

The suggestion that to the reporter all men are equal is a grue-

some doctrine; it will not hold ink for an instant. One interesting classification of people is to rank them according to the sacrifices they have made for the honor of the human spirit. In this category the artist in all realms stands close to the top. He has wrestled for humanity and for the hard privilege of expressing the dreams of men. The reporter himself may, if he chooses to think things out and not merely accept a trifling and hasty tradition, stand meritably in this gradation. He may find it sufficient to note the fact that the visiting celebrity wears a monocle. But with a little more desperate courage he might attempt to perpend what the visitor sees through that monocle. But this, the reporter cries, is editorial

privilege; the news-man is not permitted to have opinions of his own. Then let him frankly confess that he has chosen a task which reduces him to the level of a mere ink-ribbon, impacted between the hammering types of the Event and the blank paper of his employer. If this admission is made, then there is no argument. Journalism is no longer literature: for the essence of literature is the education and issue of imaginative surmise.

If newspapers are the vast philosophical forces that editors like to vapor about in their conventions, and not mere evangelists of vulgarity chalking impertinence on curbstones, let them try to peer a little beneath the surface of life. This, we admit, is probably impossible; but when did a dream be-

come less dear because it was impracticable of fulfilment?

Of course, it is irrelevant to charge the reporter with saying silly things. Boswell was one of the greatest reporters who ever lived; yet no man ever said more folly. But he knew what he was doing. The inner art of interview is to draw out from the subject characteristic matter; matter that, to the perceiving eye, feelingly persuades us what he is, whether hero or knave or clown. Boswell uttered his *bêtises* on purpose to elicit the crashing wisdom of Dr. Johnson. If nothing but sagacity had been said to the Doctor we should never know him as we do. The really odd thing is that we all attempt to crush our celebrities within the narrow formula of a

stereotyped list of questions. Interviewing is really one of the most rarefied and sentimental arts; there is no formula but intuition.

It is painfully difficult to write on such topics without uttering cant, or seeming to. But we love newspapers so much that we are willing to run the risk of putting ourself in a false position. Conrad himself has said a stunningly valid word on this very subject. In *Chance* we find:

There are on earth no actors too humble and obscure not to have a gallery; that gallery which envenoms the play by stealthy jeers, counsels of anger, amused comments, or words of perfidious compassion. . . . At sea, you know, there is no gallery. You hear no tormenting echoes of your own littleness there, where either a great elemental voice roars defiantly under the sky or else an elemental silence seems to be part of the infinite stillness of the universe.

To regard our visitors as indifferent items in an unending series of inward manifests, each the momentary plaything of the headlines, the sport of the casual reader's curiosity—this surely would be an example of "the gallery that envenoms the play." It jeopardizes the whole sense of human values on which generous living depends. Nor indeed do the reporters themselves take that point of view. Whatever lip service we may pay to the gross urgencies of edition time, we know that truth lies far, far underneath. One of those who met Conrad aboard the *Tuscania* uttered a tribute that was touching in its sincerity. "He made a very fine impression on me," he said. "So many idols crack when you get close to them."

And then he added what seemed a most curious misapprehension of the writer's temperament and a typical fallacy of the newspaper world. "Do you know what would be a nice present to give him? His publisher or some one ought to give him a subscription to a clipping bureau. There'll be columns and columns written about him. They ought to be all bound up together in a book and given to him."

But for writing, just as writing, we cannot believe that Conrad has much concern. When, thirteen years ago, David Bone sent Conrad a copy of *The Brassbounder*, then just published, Bone said he had had some thought of leaving the sea to take up literary pursuits. To which Conrad replied—and Captain Bone is fond of quoting

it—"Stick to the ship. If I had known that writing would take me away from the sea, I would never have published a line."

VI

(POSTSCRIPT). This is neither the time nor the place to annotate more intimate aspects of Mr. Conrad's visit which would be fascinating—though perhaps impertinent—to think over and discuss. But one thing, perhaps, is worth adding. My mind goes back to the evening when Conrad, generously laying aside his natural repugnance to that sort of thing, consented to talk to a group of a hundred people sitting on little gilt chairs. Taking his novel *Victory* as a text, he gave the most astonishing recreation of the actual process of an artist's mind. As

Dr. Canby said afterward, "I wonder how many of those present were able to realize how amazing it was?" The really emergent consideration, to me, in the darling man's eloquent and troubled commentary, was the endless usufruct of a creative mind: how observation, intuition, surmise, are never for an instant idle: how, throughout life, he gleans matter and suggestion here and there, in the most surprising and unlikely places: and how isolated perceptions, kindled years apart and oceans asunder, are eventually knitted together by synthesizing art. But furthermore, and most important of all to any really honest student of the matter, it struck me how utterly and thoroughly *European* Conrad is: there is a

blend of outward simplicity with deep interior sensibility and heat and energy and spiritual understanding which is more rare in the native American character. "Our Western wits," said Emerson in his famous letter to Walt Whitman, "tend to grow fat and mean." Indeed it sometimes seems that there are overtones, volatile chemistries, rich subtleties of skepticism and warmly tender harmonies of sentiment in the truly European mind (e. g. Anatole France) which are bitterly scarce over here. In the realms of the spirit it does seem that the European takes for granted so much that we are still laboriously arguing. I would not have it otherwise, for it makes the collision of ocean-divided intellects particularly fruitful and amusing.

And it must also be added, as a curious parenthesis, that Americans are the promptest in the world to recognize and applaud talent not their own. Perhaps it is not unlike the old temperamental dissidence between Athens and Sparta.

All that needs to be said at the moment is this: that Mr. Conrad's visit to this country was, even to those of his craft who had no opportunity to see him, an event of happiest import. It was satisfying to discern in his bearing, by and bye, flashes of that grim and perhaps sardonic temper for which one had specially loved him: this, surely, is the necessary complement of his adorable graciousness, affection, and charm. "Anger," old Fuller remarked, "is one of the

sinews of the soul"; and certainly one likes man to express, now and then, his indignation toward the gods. But in meeting Mr. Conrad one was aware not merely of a great artist, but also of a great gentleman: an aristocrat of the European sort in every line and lineament. The artist puts his life in your hands, he told the audience that listened to him that evening: one wondered whether they realized how gravely that is so? An artist who has won his right to speak to other minds by such heroic (and physical) efforts and sacrifices as Conrad's career shows, who has perhaps prematurely aged himself by "immense imaginative effort" (Muirhead Bone's understanding phrase) has an immeasurable claim upon our finer mem-

branes of perception. In meeting Mr. Conrad, however casually, one was aware of a novelist who understands as poets do: whose eyes see clear because they have been dipped in darkness: and whose strength and generosity are with us all in our endless impossible tasks. We hanker for loveliness on the horizon, we are inapprehensive of loveliness close to hand; desperately we struggle to discern indiscernables, to be simultaneously obedient to all the voices of command. Playing feverishly with ideas that are both too heavy and too fragile for our powers of jugglery, it is comforting for those of a younger generation to look upon the novelist who, as much as any man living, has taught us that art may not be an answer but it is

always a consolation. He should be, I believe, one of the happiest men alive, for he has brought so imperishable a happiness to others.

VII

(ADDITIONAL POSTSCRIPT, November, 1923)

THE sale of John Quinn's collection of Conrad manuscripts and first editions at the Anderson Galleries the other evening was certainly an astonishing affair. We confess that we sat hardly credible of our ears. When we tell you that the total amount bid for 230 items was as much as the money taken in at a World's Series game at the Polo Grounds—the total was \$110,998—you will realize that book collecting has unquestionably become respectable. It has en-

tered the inner circle of Big Business. Our emotions were, we confess, strangely mixed. It is always strange, on these occasions, to see how little heed is paid to the item itself which is being bargained for. The famous frequenters of auction sales — the Rosenbachs, Wellses, Drakes, Brick Rows, Walter Hills, Harry B. Smiths, Jerome Kerns—these great men sit in a drooping and apparently passionless abstraction. Only by a wave of pencil, lift of eyebrow, infinitesimal nod of head, they notify to the aquiline auctioneer their desire to carry the progression higher. And the rest of us either sit annotating our catalogues or watch the presiding officer with a gape of amazement, but afraid to move for fear some unguarded

gesture will be taken as an offer of Sixteen Hundred Dollars. A man with nervous twitchings who happened into such a session once became the owner of one of the choicest small collections of First Editions in the world; but it cost him eighty thousand dollars. That was the beginning, very likely, of a famous private library.

But the "items" themselves pass between the glowing red curtains almost unremarked. It seemed almost ironical that they were displayed only in their morocco "solander" slip cases. (And what that word "solander" means we have never been able to find out. The dictionary, if you try to look it up, refers you to *sallender*, which it describes as a disease on the hind leg of a horse; which is disappoint-

ing.) It is as though those written pages themselves, the fruit of a man's lifetime of artistic labor, the harvest of his dreams and ardors, his hours of despairing or ecstatic toil, those pages whose inner meaning can perhaps only be guessed by fellow-workmen (however humble) in the same craft, shrink from disclosing themselves in a mixed and predominantly mercantile company. Let us not be unduly sentimental; yet those strangely blackened pages have a certain sacredness of their own. They come from a world where, in essence, things are not buyable or for sale; a world of pure creation. And they pass safely enigmatic in their smooth brown "solanders," across the darkly shining little red stage of

the auction room; a few thousand pages of inky loops and scratches. Inhabited by phantoms, a world in themselves, a microcosm of life with its errors, its hopes, its confusions, perfect, imperfect, tragic, triumphant, they pass. The Great Dealers sit in judgment; after bidding four or five thousand for some "lot," it may happen that one of them will turn to you and ask if it's "any good."

Yet it would be silly to be cynical. It is doubtful if any writer has ever been more honored in his lifetime—in the terms of honor as reckoned in auction rooms—than Conrad was that evening. For the manuscript of *Almayer's Folly*, \$5,300. For that of *An Outcast of the Islands*, \$4,100. *The Nigger of the "Narcissus,"*

\$4,500. The preface of the *Nigger* (eleven pages of MS.), \$1,100. *Youth*, \$2,000. *Typhoon*, \$5,100. *Nostramo*, \$4,700. *The Secret Agent*, \$3,900. *Under Western Eyes*, \$6,900. *Chance*, \$6,600. *Victory*, \$8,100. So it went. Nor were these astounding transactions at an end when the auction itself was over. We hear that at 1:30 A. M. the same night, while the zealots were talking over the "desirability" of the various items, Gabriel Wells sold to Jerome Kern the MS. of *Under Western Eyes*, for which he had bid highest earlier in the evening. It would be quaint to hear what some of Mr. Conrad's phantoms—let us say Axel Heyst, or James Wait, or Marlow himself—would have had to say if they had witnessed

these transactions. We seemed to see them colloquing behind those thick red velvet hangings.

There is always on such occasions a curious desire to know "what the author would have said." There is sometimes a vague suspicion in the spectator's mind that the author would be annoyed if he knew about it. We hardly think so. He would be flattered, of course; there is no greater compliment possible in human affairs than other men's eagerness to pay actual coinage for such humble and personal wreckage as the first draft of a work of imagination. But also, in a very strange way, he would remain unmoved. No one who has not actually experienced even the smallest twinges in that same realm of trouble can quite

grasp the strange detachment of a writer from the completed evidence of his labor. He looks at it with a gruesome tenderness; a very genuine tenderness, truly; but also with shuddering and surprise. It recalls too much besetting, grinding diligence, too many disappointments and disgusts, too many passionate seizures and shakings of the spirit for him to want to keep it near by. He can hardly destroy it: that would be too much like retrospective suicide; yet it is too violently disturbing to keep for his own miserable contemplation. It is like some old unhappy love affair in the long ago: it dare not be recalled, it cannot be forgotten. Every work of imagination is a love affair that ends unhappily. It ends unhappily simply because it ends.

It ends; your cherished little phantoms pass across the small darkly burning platform of the artist's mind: they walk off, they mingle with the audience, they disappear. They can never be called back. As Conrad himself wrote to Mr. Quinn about the MS. of the *Nigger*: "I haven't seen the pages for sixteen years and they looked to me strange, as if written by some man I used to know in the past and just could remember dimly." Yes: how much more clearly one remembers the phantoms of one's imagination than one remembers one's self. That is their happiness and their sorrow. They are as they are, unchangeable. God help them! And Mr. Conrad's feeling about the strange adventure his children underwent

that evening on the small, darkly glowing rostrum of the Anderson Galleries would be (we venture) expressed by his own heroic gesture—"the sigh which is not a sob, the smile which is not a grin."

THE END

Date Due

~~NEW 50~~ 19/1

PR 6005 .O4 Z783
Morley, Christopher, 1890
Conrad and the reporters.

010101 000



0 1999 0015833 8
TRENT UNIVERSITY

PR6005 .O4Z783

Morley, Christopher Darlington
Conrad and the reporters

DATE

ISSUED TO

86839

86839

